I Found Out My Real Father-in-law is Vladimir Putin...and He Wants Me Dead?!

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It was Tuesday morning and I was scrambling the eggs. My wife, Edith, brought me scallions from the garden. As I sliced them with a pair of scissors into the mixing bowl of eggs Edith leaned against the counter and unlocked her phone.

"I got some weird news this morning."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, I guess my biological father is actually someone else?"

"Not Jim?"

"No, it's really weird. Apparently it's Vladimir Putin." I continued to cut the scallions. The last few centimeters of stalk fell into the viscous yellow pool and I set the scissors down.

"Your mom had sex with the current president of Russia?"

"Apparently." Edith took the scissors and opened the package of vegetarian sausage waiting on the counter.

"So in 1990 Putin was here? Having sex with your mom?"

"He must have been. I don't think she's ever been out of the United States." She squeezed the sausage package into the frying pan full of charred peppers and onions. "They want me to go visit."

"Like, *the Kremlin* wants you to visit? That seems really scary." I poured the egg mixture into a warm pot coated in olive oil.

"I'm going to do it. I have time. They said..." She unlocked her phone again, scrolled down, and held it closer to her face. "They said you can come too." I watched the eggs solidify in the pot. Edith set her phone down and stirred the sizzling sausage.

We sat down to eat.

I had not flown first class before the first leg of our Kremlin appointed journey. The seats were massive and comfortable. No other first class seats were occupied. Edith and I both accepted the champagne offered by the coiffed steward of the cabin.

"Toast," she said, smiling. We had not smiled much since leaving for SeaTac. "We might as well enjoy these luxurious accommodations. I don't know what we're in for."

I clinked my glass with hers. Real glass. We had been advised to not discuss the specifics of our trip out loud and since I could only think of questions about what Vladimir Putin, the president of Russia, was going to do to us I just smiled back. Dozens of people filed onto the plane and oozed into the economy cabin. They stopped, started, and pushed around each other. Their faces were blank, placidly mirroring the pure grey skies above the airport.

"The world is ugly, and the people are sad," I quoted.

"Hm?" Edith had already finished her champagne and was focused on her laptop screen. I recognized the shape of her master's thesis.

"Nothing. Just some poetry."

"Ah, mm."

"Hey, remind me the name of your thesis?"

"Mmmmm..." she hummed as she finished typing a thought. "I might change it still but for now it's "The Accursed Share of the Attention Economy, or, The Solar Abacus."

"I like it. Could two Battaile references be too many?" Edith looked at me and smirked.

"I'm actually trying to work in a third. The excess...it's like...a meta reference." I grinned.

"You're absurd and I love you."

"I love you too, absurdly."

The steward offered us another round of drinks. I asked for a gin and tonic and started browsing the movie listing on my chair's private screen. Edith requested coffee and resumed work.

The travel itinerary set up for us by the Kremlin was convoluted but got us to Moscow with little hassle. A series of trains brought us from Poland through Belarus and, finally, Moscow. Snowfall thickened as the last train approached the capital. The windows of the train became a white and gray blur and when it stopped I could not make out the station we had pulled into. Our guide, Sergei, motioned us out onto the platform. Men in dark suits took our bags away on carts. The carts slipped and slid on the snow and Sergei noticed me staring after them.

"Is always snowing here," he said with a shrug. I took out my phone to take a picture so I'd remember my first steps in Moscow. Sergei cleared his throat.

"Actually I'm sorry, I need to take your phones. They are security risks. I'm sorry for the inconvenience. We've prepared replacements, though." He reached into his oversized parka and pulled out two phones. One was blue, like mine, and the other was black, like my wife's. He held out the two phones stacked on one palm. He extended the other palm, empty, waiting for our phones. Snowflakes gathered on his naked hand but Sergei did not seem to mind.

I looked at Edith, my phone in my hand. She looked back into my eyes, inhaled, exhaled, and then turned to Sergei. She nodded, digging her phone out of her jacket and placing it on his open palm. I stacked my phone on top of hers. I examined my replacement: it was, at first glance, the exact same make and model of phone. I instinctively ran my finger along the phone's back, feeling for the rough angles of the spider crack caused by a recent drop. They were there.

"Oh, I think I grabbed my phone back, I'm sorry." I offered the phone back to Sergei. He held up his empty hands.

"No. That is the correct phone. It should feel familiar." I tried to unlock the phone but it would not recognize my face. Edith noted my struggle.

"Try your PIN. Mine worked." She held up her unlocked phone. It had the same picture of our dog, Betty, set as its background just like her actual phone.

"No way. They must be setting it on first use." I tried random PINs, but the phone would not unlock. "I don't want my PIN to work. It means..." I glanced at Sergei but did not want to make eye contact. He cleared his throat.

"We tried to make these phones exactly like your usual ones. I'm sure you'll find them to your likings. I really am sorry to rush you but we are keeping schedule today. Let us proceed."

I put the new phone in my pocket, blindly searching with my thumb around its edges to inventory the familiar dents and scratches. It seemed like they were in all the right places, but I couldn't exactly remember the placements of the dents.

Sergei led us out of the empty train station onto a sidewalk covered in unbroken snow. A black car idled there, its exhaust mingling with the swirling white.

I stared at the table in front of me. It was massive and made from a dark, natural wood. Scars, scratches, and cartouches covered the surface. I had tried to follow the conversation at the other end of the table but the distance was so great I could barely make it out. Edith sat with Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, at the head of a table the length of at least four adult coffins. I could tell who was speaking but not what was said. Putin's voice was low like an angry secret. His eyes never met mine but I still felt watched by his glare.

The human markings in the table were largely in cyrillic letters and thus illegible to me. I could see numbers, though: 41, 42, 43, 44, 45. The table had been assembled from many disparate planks all joined under a thick layer of resin. In many places, the wood was marred with holes ranging from the diameter of a penny to that of a quarter. After a dozen inventories of the table's markings I could no longer bear to stare at it and needed a diversion. Moving only my arm, I gently removed the phone I had been issued from my left pant pocket. I still had not unlocked it and stared at the screen. The phone's background was the same as on my phone: a photo of a willow tree I took in a cemetery somewhere in Connecticut. I stared at the lock screen.

If they already know so much about my phone they probably already know my PIN, I reasoned. I pressed the first number in my PIN.

“It is time to go, now,” said Sergei from behind me. I jumped in my seat and the phone clattered on the concrete floor. I looked to the end of the table. Vladimir Putin, the president of Russia, was staring at me silently. His face was still. His eyes did not blink or waver. I read malice into the blank space where his expression should be. Edith had turned in her chair and was staring at a black and white photo on the wall. “Your father in law has scheduled bonding time with you. He recognizes that you are now a part of his family. Please, follow me.”

I retrieved the phone and looked to Edith. She turned toward me, smiling with her mouth and frowning with her eyes. It was a familiar look. Sergei motioned me towards the door. We left the meeting chamber and followed a series of hallways, staircases, and foyers in silence. We stopped at a heavy steel door covered in rust spots and flaking red paint.

“You will now visit the president’s dacha. He has a task that you will assist him with.”

“Dacha?”

“It is a kind of country home.”

“In Moscow?”

“Please, go ahead.” Sergei spun a large wheel and an unseen latch clanked and scraped metal on metal. The door swung toward us, revealing a grassy meadow. A few wooden buildings were in the distance before a background of coniferous trees.

“What is this?” I asked.

“Please, go ahead. The president is expecting you. Refreshments await.” I stepped through the doorway. The grass felt real under my feet. Small flies buzzed the green blades below me. I could hear bird song, then, the sound of the steel door latching behind me. I turned to study it. The door was set into a concrete wall that rose into low, foggy clouds. The wall was part of a rectangular structure surrounded by more trees. I could not see past the fog above me, but noted that light somehow permeated the meadow as from a mid-morning sun.

I walked towards the wooden buildings. One was a multi-level cabin with a wraparound porch. The other looked like a barn or large storage shed. Both were

unpainted and worn but well intact. On the patchy grass between the buildings splintered and stained heavy wooden crates were piled on each other haphazardly. I heard: a crack, a screech, a thump. The sounds repeated and grew louder as I approached the crate stack. I rounded the corner, wincing at the cracking and screeching and crashing, and stopped abruptly before Vladimir Putin, the president of Russia.

He stared at me. In his hands he held a crowbar. Besides a plain pair of tan slacks he wore only a drab, brown vest. His otherwise nude torso glistened with sweat.

"You are here. Today, we sort armaments." He spoke monotonously and with only a faint accent to his English. He turned back to the crates. The crowbar stabbed into the old wood with a loud crack. Putin tightened his grip and pushed down on the crowbar, ripping open the lid of the crate with a screech. He threw the lid onto the ground with a dull thump. I could only see straw in the crate.

"You." He held out the crowbar. I took it with both hands. Despite Putin's labor and sweat, the metal was cold in my hands. I thrust the prying end of the crowbar at the next unopened crate. My aim was too high and I only managed to splinter the wood. The bar shot forward across the top of the lid and I slammed the side of my hand into the splintered mess.

"Fuck! Shit!" I yelled. The crowbar fell to the ground as I shook out my bloody hand. Putin was silent and immobile. I looked at him but his eyes were fixated on the crates. I picked up the crowbar and tried again. With grunting, swearing effort I got the lid of the crate off and onto the ground. I offered the crowbar back to Putin but he would not acknowledge me. His eyes were closed and he was inhaling deeply through his nose. I sniffed. From the crates came a kind of oily car smell I did not recognize.

I opened the next crate without injury. My arms felt sore.

"Stop. We will sort." Putin unfolded black canvas tarp that was tucked between some crates and spread it on the ground. He reached for another tarp and motioned at me. I found more tucked away and spread them. He bent into the nearest crate, reaching in with both arms, and straightened up bear-hugging an armful of firearms and filthy straw. Even in the dull light of the foggy air I could see that they were faintly glistening

with some kind of thick coating. He dropped them on the first tarp, then motioned at each tarp in turn.

"Russian. German. Japanese. Italian. American. British. Otherwise. Now, sort." He pointed at the crate next to me.

"I, uh." I started to ask questions but Putin was not looking at me. He had picked up a rifle and was studying minute markings on its barrel. He was covered in the strong-smelling grease that coated the guns but did nothing about it. I reached into my crate and felt the straw scratching against my injured hand as if I was petting a hedgehog backward. I got my hand around a gun barrel and drew out a short, metal thing. As an avid enjoyer of media set in World War II I recognized it as something German. I placed it on the second tarp, but Putin did not seem to notice.

I felt around again, this time with my uninjured hand, and pulled out a rifle. It had a wooden stock. I had no ideas regarding its provenance. I tried to make out some markings on its barrel through the layer of grease that covered it but could only see numbers. I thought I saw an "S" and since it didn't strike me as an American arm I figured it might be British. I put it on the appropriate tarp. Though his back was to me, Putin froze as I set the rifle down.

"That is incorrect. Do you mean to insult Russia?" I squatted down and grabbed up the rifle.

"Oh no, no I don't, I'm sorry." I moved to place the rifle on the first tarp. Putin spun around and grabbed the rifle from my hands. He aimed it at my eyes and pulled back the rifle's bolt action.

"Do you think it's loaded?" he asked. I didn't know how to respond. I opened my mouth, but Putin suddenly turned and pulled the rifle's trigger. The gun fired. My world reduced to nothing but the roar of the rifle's report. I had never heard anything so loud and snapped my hands to my ears uselessly. I staggered backwards, moving my hands to my face as I realized that whatever grease covered the rifle must have gotten heated and expelled as the gun fired. It had splattered all over my face and burned as if a dozen nails had pierced my skin.

“Oh fuck, god,” I managed. I could only open one eye without searing pain. Putin still held the rifle in a firing position. He smiled and pulled back the rifle’s bolt. A shell spun out, leaving a thin trail of smoke and emitting more pearls of hot grease. He slammed the bolt shut and said,

“You can go in the house.” I figured there would be a sink and some way to clear the hot oil out of my face and eye there so I stumbled towards the multistory cabin. The door was unlocked but it was dark inside. I felt the wall for a light switch. My wife’s voice came from across the room.

“Herb? Oh shit, are you okay?” The room brightened; Edith had flipped a switch somewhere. “I heard the gun. I don’t feel well. I think we should go.”

“My eye. I need help. Water, somewhere?” I could feel Edith’s hand on my arm.

“Here, this way, come upstairs. He left me up there. There’s a kitchen.”

I hunched over the sink and rinsed my eye, rubbing it and squeezing it shut until I could keep it open with only a slight sting. Edith handed me a towel as I turned off the faucet. I rubbed it on my face. It was rough and had a musty, vegetal smell to it. Dry, I looked at Edith. Her brow was creased and her lips pulled tightly into a grimace. We embraced.

“We need to get out of Russia,” she said into my shoulder. “I do not like the things he showed me. The things he said.”

“I’m ready to go. But, I’m worried we’re trapped.” Edith pulled away from our hug and turned to a small table in the center of the room. I looked around the kitchen now with both eyes finally unblinking. A bare bulb lit the small room. A heavy iron stove sat coldly in one corner. Two rough wooden counters flanked the sink where I had flushed out my face. Over them, windows looked out into the haze. The other walls were covered in shelving and most of the shelving was covered in books. Cooking tools were shoved here and there among the tightly packed stacks of diverse books. Edith picked up a book from a stack on the table before her.

“I found this. I can only partially make out the Russian but with these illustrations…” She offered the open book to me. The illustrations were of an airport. “I

think that's Sheremetyevo in the 60s when it was opened for civilians. Turn the page. There was some kind of attraction built to celebrate the fact that the airport was opening on the 100th year of the publication of Crime and Punishment." I turned the page and stared at another illustration. Families standing in an apartment looking at two bloodied corpses.

"A Dostoyevsky theme park. It's incredible, but I don't see how it helps?"

"It's connected to the airport. I think we can sneak through it and get to a plane."

"This book is from the 60s though. Surely it's gone?" I shut the book and handed it back to Edith, who took it in both hands.

"I think it's still around. I saw some Russian urban explorers post a video about it to YouTube a few years ago. I was able to figure out the address from this book."

"He's going to try, though...to." My throat tightened. I turned to the window and leaned over the counter to see through to the ground below. Putin was staring at me. A grid of pistols lay at his feet with their magazines all removed. Bullets were piled neatly next to them. He raised his arms, aiming a pistol at me. I jerked my body backwards and fell. I yelled but heard nothing but the blast of the pistol and the shattering of the glass window. Edith grabbed my arm and dragged me to my feet.

"We need to go now." She pulled me to the stairs and we pounded down them. She headed to the back of the first floor. I turned back to the front of the house to see Vladimir Putin, the president of Russia, framed by the open door. He fired again and I ran. Edith crashed through a door at the back of the house and stopped, looking left and right. "Here, help!" she yelled. She grabbed the handle on a basement hatch and started pulling. I pushed next to her and pulled on the metal handle until it wrenched open with a rusty scream.

Edith ducked into the darkness below the hatch and I followed. I expected more wood and dirt, but the stairs leading down from the hatch were steel like the tunnels leading to the meadow. Flickering red bulbs lined a long hallway ahead of us. The hallway opened up into a large machine room. We ran into a wall of hot, wet air and slid on the slimy grate of a catwalk. I caught Edith as she lost her footing and fell backward.

“What the fuck is this?” I yelled over the hissing, clanking, and growling of unseen machinery below the catwalk.

“It must control the atmosphere up there, in the dome,” she said as she moved forward at a careful jog. “Maybe we can lose him down there and find a tunnel out toward the city. Look for a ladder, or-” Edith was cut off by another shot from Putin’s pistol. The air cracked between us and sparks lit up the cavernous room as his bullet ricocheted off of the machinery. A machine below began sputtering and belching dense, hot steam upwards through the grate. It billowed around us as we surged forward. We clasped our arms to stay stable.

Edith moved to the left, turning around and mounting a ladder. She looked up at me and held one finger over her lips as she descended. I followed. At the base of the ladder, a far wall was perforated with dark tunnels.

“Fuck,” I whispered. “Which way?” Edith motioned toward one of the tunnels. As we entered its blackness I turned to look back up at the catwalk. I could only see billowing steam backlit by a red glow like a flashlight pressed up against pale skin.

It did not take long before we could see nothing ahead or behind us in the dark tunnel. I kept one hand on the slimy stone wall and the other on Edith’s back as we kept a quiet pace. The wall was warm, at first, but cooled as we advanced. It became cold and clammy like the handshake of someone terrified of dying. Edith slowed to a stop. I felt her turn her back to the wall and let out a long sigh.

“I don’t think he’s coming. I don’t think my father, Vladimir Putin, the President of Russia, is coming,” she said quietly.

“He might send people after us? Search the tunnels?”

“Maybe, but I don’t hear anything yet. I’m going to check this phone.” Edith pulled out her phone. I couldn’t think of a way a phone could help us as deeply underground as I assumed we were, but I said nothing. “Look. Maps is working. I think I can get us towards a metro station.” I tried to protest. Navigation of any kind shouldn’t work, I tried to mutter, but only disconnected vowel shaped grunts fell out like loose change.

“This way, I think.” We zigged and zagged through in slow motion through intersecting tunnels using the lights on the phones to see. I stepped on something that cracked under my shoe. I didn’t care what it was, but soon both Edith and I were both crunching things with every foot fall. I bent down. The tunnel floor was covered by a carpet of tiny bones.

“Uh, rats. I think rats.” I shined the phone’s light forward. The miniature rib cages threw shadows on the tunnel walls like the bars of a prison cell. Edith said something but I stared at the sea of bone. It formed a lunar landscape and behind me I could see the regular impact craters of our footprints. The bones started to quiver and I crouched even lower to watch them. They shook with increasing violence and a roar soon enveloped me. I tried to stand, but lost my footing as a train passed nearby and shook our tunnel. Thousands of bones stabbed through my clothes and into my palms as I struggled to my feet. Edith was pulling my arm and, standing, I realized the phone was in there somewhere. The rumbling decrescendoed.

I could see the phone’s light seeping upward and reached for it. A new sound, one even louder than the passing train, sent my hands back up to my ears. The ground before me exploded, spraying my face with razor shards of bone and phone. I saw his silhouette in the muzzle flash. Vladimir Putin, the president of Russia, had found us.

We ran, slipping on the bone carpet. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven more explosions lit up the tunnel and sent clouds of stone raining on us from the tunnel walls. We rounded a corner and Edith stopped abruptly. I skidded on bones and hit her braced back, looking backwards. Putin had not yet rounded the corner. Sweat stung my bone holes.

“Here,” she hissed. There was a door. We passed through it quietly and shut it behind us. It locked behind us. “I think this is a metro stop.”

We exited what turned out to be a maintenance tunnel at the far end of a metro platform.

“This line should work. We’ll take the next train.” Edith turned off her phone and pocketed it. I instinctively reached for mine, finding an empty pocket. Edith leaned against a wall and slid down. I joined her, resting my head on her shoulder. I picked

bone bits from my palms. Edith brushed some filth from my hair and kissed my head. Moscovians dotted the platform and ignored us. They stared at phones, at books, or off into space.

I woke Edith with a light nudge.

"We're here," I muttered. "At least, I think so." Edith inhaled deeply and looked around. She nodded and stood. No one on the train car had taken notice of us when we got on despite our wretched condition and no one looked up as we got off. I remembered the pursuit of Vladimir Putin, the president of Russia, as I would a fading nightmare. We exited the metro among a sparse crowd of Muscovians and entered the chill air of early evening. Snow was still falling. Planes passed by overheard to land at Sheremetyevo, the sounds of their engines muffled by the thick snow drifts around us. Our coats were hardly up to the task of comforting us and we held each other as we pushed through the powdery morass.

Edith was shivering too much to form words but motioned at the boarded up building before us. I could not feel my hands nor face after walking for blocks, but could feel a small warm spark of hope that this dilapidated building was our portal to liberty. There was no obvious point of entry. I looked up and could not see the top of the building. It ascended into the snowy, misty clouds above us. It was backed by a great wall topped with coils of razor wire tumbling like overgrown ivy. The main entrance, a row of doors, was solidly barricaded. Edith poked, prodded, and felt the blockade while I trudged around the side of the building. A dark alleyway had collected snow up to my chest and I pushed forward with my arms thrust out like Frankenstein's monster. I connected with something solid against the wall of the building and scraped enough snow away to see it. It was a dumpster, its lid partially held open by its contents. I moved around it and found what I had hoped for: a side door, partially obscured by the dumpster's edge and almost totally buried in snow. I groped and pushed with my numb fingers along the door frame. I could feel nothing but pressure on my fingers in the shape of a padlock.

Edith had come around the corner and had pushed open the dumpster. She pulled a long shape from inside. It was an ax. I dug and dug until the padlock poked out of the snow. We took turns smashing at the lock and then used the ax to pry the door open against the weight of the snow.

It was dark inside. Edith turned on her phone's light again. Cloth covered piles surrounded us. From the side, I could see her silhouette. The ax hung loosely in her hand. Snow liquified on its head and pooled where its rusted iron touched the floor like the blood of an insubstantial thing. The cold bit less from inside and Edith managed to speak through a shiver.

"Okay. I think we need to go up. Somehow." She shined her phone's light around. We were in an office. Filing cabinets lined one wall. Ahead of us a large opening for a check-in counter framed only darkness beyond. On the desk behind the check-in counter I saw a toolbox. It looked newer than the surrounding furniture and less dusty. Inside, I found a flashlight piled up with various tools. The flashlight worked. It penetrated the darkness beyond the check-in window. A mural covered the wall opposite the window. It depicted Raskolnikov standing over the supine forms of a family of four, all with blond hair, blue eyes, and grinning faces. Raskolnikov's brow was furrowed and blood was dripping from his ax to the floor. Cyrillic, unintelligible to me, bordered the painting. Arrows motioned past the check-in counter deeper into the building.

"The arrows will take us up, I think." Edith said. She opened the door out of the office and walked past the mural and around the corner. I followed. I avoided Raskolnikov's gaze as I passed by him. The stairs were not far. Though the walls of the ground floor were all concrete, the stairs looked wooden. Edith paused at the first step.

"There is something weird with the floor. It's..." she was testing her feet. I could hear the smack of something tacky clinging to the sole of her boot. I knelt down to examine a dark patch under her.

"It looks like dried blood." I scraped at the edge of the stain with my boot edge and could feel hard metal rungs. "There is a grate, here. Was this part of the attraction?"

“I don’t know, but the stain keeps going.” Edith motioned up the stairs with her light. “Like some it was some kind of fountain.”

“Let’s just keep moving.” Edith took the first step and paused.

“The smell,” she said quietly. “It’s like being drowned in metal.” She continued up and I followed. On each step I pulled against the sticky stain clinging to my feet. The staircase turned left and right with many small landings. Some of the landings had figures of Raskolnikov in various poses. I did not look at his faces.

Despite the cold I could feel myself starting to sweat. I had lost count of the landings. We kept climbing. Through heavy breathing, Edith managed a single word:

“There.” I looked up and could see the end of the stairs. I could feel the vibrations of landing planes. We quickened our pace as best we could. Before we could summit, however, he appeared: Vladimir Putin, the president of Russia.

Edith froze, dropping her phone and ax and lifting her hands to her face as Putin’s pistol rose from his side. I dropped the flashlight and grabbed the ax, arcing it over my head at Putin. My arms felt so heavy I could barely swing the tool but it still connected heavily with some part of him. He staggered and I pulled Edith backwards. We let gravity throw us back the way we had come. A bullet hit the head of a Raskolnikov statue, showering us both with hard bits as we rounded the corner of the first landing. It was dark, now, and we had only the wall and fear to guide us back to the ground floor.

I held Edith’s hand and groped along the wall of the ground floor. I could not orient myself and had no idea whence we came. My hand found a metal panel and I felt a craving for light. I could hear the distant footfalls of Vladimir Putin, the president of Russia, slowly descending the stairs behind us. I opened the panel and flipped every switch I could find with my blind fingers. Lights blazed on, some bulbs shattering and sparking overhead. Tchaikovsky boomed out of crackling speakers. A liquid roar sputtered to life somewhere up the stairwell. Edith tightened her grip on my hand and shouted over the Tchaikovsky into my ear.

“Look! The stairwell!” Blood ran in a torrent down the stairs, pooling on the floor. Drainage was impossible. There was too much old blood coating the grate. I

stepped back from the blood flood by instinct, but the tumbling form of Vladimir Putin crashed into the base of the stairs splashing blood up and all over us. His pistol and our ax clattered after him, skidding past his crumpled form on the slick floor. He must have slipped, I thought, but all I could say was a syllabic yell that approximated the words "now" and "run" simultaneously.

Edith paused to grab the ax and leapt over Putin's still figure to the stairs. We climbed again. I ignored the burning in my legs and the sweat filling up my coat, focusing instead on straddling the fountain of blood now rushing down the center of the stairwell.

I don't remember when we started crawling but we crested the stairs on all fours. Edith never let go of the ax. I dragged myself over the spouts inlaid in the top step pulsing blood like a head wound. I couldn't tell which parts of me were drenched in sweat and which were drenched in blood. Both fluids were too warm.

A crash sounded over the blasting Tchaikovsky and a rush of cold air enveloped me. It was soothing. I started to strip off my coat. I wanted to drink the air with my skin.

"No, no, you'll need that, come on! This tunnel leads to the airstrip!" Edith stood over me, the ax head inches from my face. She put out a hand for me. I gave up fiddling with my coat and reached upward. Our filthy, stained, blood-wet fingers entwined into a heart shape. The heart was pierced, and only after I watched the stigmata pass through our grip could I understand the sound of the gun from the stairwell. It was Vladimir Putin, the president of Russia. His aim was unsteady and his suit crumpled and soaked with blood. A torn flap of forearm skin hung out of a gash in his suit's left arm where my ax had struck him. Edith let go of my hand and screamed.

Her ax knocked away his aiming fists and embedded itself in Putin's chest. He started to fall backwards and steadied himself on the stairwell's door frame.

"I will open you and spill that which your guilty flesh can hardly contain," he said, staring at Edith. "You were made for the abattoir." He slumped down and splayed backwards on the steps. Vladimir Putin, the president of Russia, slid slowly down the stairs in the flow of the blood fountain's gurgling torrent.

Edith cried all the way through the tunnel. On the airstrip we found a cargo plane. Workers ignored us and we saw no guards. We settled among shrink wrapped pallets of consumer goods. I found a shipment of blue jeans and ripped it open. I shredded a pair and made tourniquets for our hands. I made a nest of the jeans and we slept there, huddled together.

The plane went west. A winding train took us across Europe and we flew home from Lisbon. At home, we have not spoken about what happened. We have seen Vladimir Putin, the president of Russia, on the television. My wife always turns it off.